



Rise of Consumerism & Mass Culture in the 1920s

Post-World War I American society became increasingly standardized as automobiles, electric appliances and mass entertainment became available to ordinary Americans.

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At the end of World War I, the American industry, whose capacity had significantly expanded during the conflagration, needed new markets to sustain the production of goods. These markets were soon made available by the emerging advertising industry, which specialized in creating and maintaining the need for a variety of modern products and services. Advertising campaigns, the radio and the movie industry standardized American life and undermined regional diversity, but at the same time helped forge a national culture and reinvent behaviors. Although the consumerist attitude encouraged waste and triggered an economic downslope movement

toward the Great Depression, it also offered ordinary Americans opportunities they had never dreamed of in the previous decades.

An Era of Emancipation and Mass Entertainment

As life in the U.S. became increasingly standardized, workplace routine caused Americans to shift their attention toward leisure-time activities. The monotonous assembly lines and the harsh managerial supervision no longer allowed workers to take pride in the individuality of their work. Prospects of advancement were almost inexistent and the skills required to perform a job became narrower. Workers were now mere links in a chain of industrial production. In this context, pastimes became vital sources of fulfillment.

In their spare time, people went to the movies, listened to the radio and gathered in stadiums to watch professional baseball and college football. In 1926 and 1927, the first radio networks, NBC and CBS, were established. All across the country, people listened to the same shows and became obsessed with the same tunes. Radio sales soared, approaching seven million sets by 1927, according to Boyer and Clark's *The Enduring Vision – A History of the American People*, Vol. II.

While the radio was an indoor experience that people enjoyed in their homes, movie theaters allowed them to leave behind the comfort of their daily surroundings and participate in the adventures that the big screen promised. The motion picture industry underwent a spectacular development after 1927, when the feature-length film *The Jazz Singer* introduced synchronized sound. Movie stars, radio celebrities and professional athletes became heroes, symbols of the escape from a regimented existence.

Although inventions such as the radio and the movies further standardized culture, they opened the doors to a previously unknown world. While the air waves and the big screen mentally transported Americans to places

they had never had access to before, another increasingly popular invention, the automobile, allowed them to take long drives in the country, plan family vacations and visit faraway cities. For decades, the automobile had been a luxury reserved for rich Americans. In 1907, Henry Ford announced his intention to create a car that would be available to the average working family. By 1920, his plant at Highland Park produced a finished Model T every sixty seconds, according to “Industries: Business History of Automotive Manufacturers/Suppliers (A-G)”. As Ford soon discovered, the key to making an affordable automobile was an efficient, standardized production process. By the late 1920s, thousands of identical cars roamed the country’s roads.

The rise of the consumerist culture had perhaps the most dramatic impact on the role American women played in society. As work and behavior patterns shifted, domestic life was forever altered. The hours of housework were reduced by the new appliances now available to many families. Bakery bread, canned food and refrigeration allowed women to spend less time on food preparation. Many women went to work outside their homes, as sales clerks in the newly-created department stores and as office employees in advertising firms. While they joined the work force in increasing numbers, they also became the main consumers. Magazines and advertising campaigns targeting the female population lured women toward supermarkets, department stores and mail order catalogs. The mass-produced automobiles allowed them more freedom of movement, at a time when old conventions and morals were replaced by a more relaxed behavior. In the Roaring Twenties, the American woman became a less domestic, less inhibited and more active participant to modern life.

The Down Side of Mass Production and Mass Consumption

While most Americans enjoyed the new prosperity, few people were aware of the problems that threatened long-term economic stability and the environment. Energy consumption soared in the 1920s due to the electric appliances replacing manual labor in many homes. Plants and car exhaust emissions exerted an increasingly heavy toll on the environment. However, pollution and the diminishing wildlife seemed distant threats to most Americans.

In addition to the environmental setback, the automobile also had a significant social and cultural impact on American life. The accident rate continued to increase throughout the decade and urban planners now had to deal with new challenges such as traffic jams, parking concerns and an insufficiently developed infrastructure. Moreover, the mobility that cars allowed affected family cohesion. Young people who had access to automobiles spent more time in entertainment outlets and less and less time with their families.

The optimism of the 1920s was fueled by the emerging mass media empire, the advertising industry and the corporations that marketed electric appliances, automobiles and mass illusions. Consumer confidence had reached an all-time high. However, the new consumerist attitude led to irrational spending and overproduction, which eventually set the stage for the most severe economic depression in the history of the United States.

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Name_____

Date_____

Period_____

Reading Comprehension

1. What is the title of this reading?

2. When was the reading written?

3. What two major events came before and after the era the author discusses?

4. In the first paragraph the author uses the word “standardized,” using the context clues, define the term.

5. What effect did the workplace routines and monotony have on American Culture?

What are three things people did in their spare time during this era?

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. What was the first invention to reach seven million households by 1927?

10. What automobile company was the first to make cars affordable and therefore accessible to many more Americans?

11. What allowed for the manufacturer to produce these cars at an affordable price?

12. What diminished the hours of work women had to do?

What does the following quote mean?

Magazines and advertising campaigns targeting the female population lured women toward supermarkets, department stores and mail order catalogs.

13. _____

14. _____

What environmental problems arose from the prosperity? What were there causes?

15. _____

16. _____

What does the author claim caused the Great Depression?

17. _____

18. _____

From the information you have learned this week, do you agree with the author.

Please Explain.
